

## Venezuela's 2008 Regional Elections

On November 23<sup>rd</sup> 2008, millions of Venezuelans will go to the polls to elect state and municipal authorities. This will be the 11<sup>th</sup> national electoral process to be held in Venezuela since President Hugo Chávez was first elected in December 1998, and as with previous elections, they are expected to come under much scrutiny both nationally and internationally.

A total of 603 officials will be elected on November 23<sup>rd</sup>: 22 state governors, 328 mayors, 233 state legislative council members, 13 council members for the Caracas Metropolitan area, and 7 members of the Alto Apure District Council. While political parties present single candidates for the election of mayors and governors, for the election of the various council members they present both single candidates and lists of candidates (60% of these are single candidates and 40% are from parties' lists of candidates).<sup>1</sup>



In Venezuelan elections, as in elections in a number of other Latin American countries, candidates that are on party lists are elected by proportional representation. This means that if, for instance, a party is asked to present a list of 10 candidates for 10 positions on a regional legislative council and the list wins 60% of the vote then the 6 first candidates on the list will have positions on the Council.

Although not as politically decisive as Venezuela's last two elections (the 2006 presidential elections and the 2007 Constitutional Referendum), these elections are expected to draw significant voter turnout. One reason for this is that the political opposition to the Chávez government is making a significant effort to mobilize its supporters by presenting these elections as a key battle in their struggle to remove President Chávez from office. In contrast, during the run-up to the previous regional elections in 2004, much of the opposition called on their supporters to abstain in an effort to discredit the Venezuelan electoral system, which they claimed was "fraudulent" after their defeat in the August 2004 referendum on the mandate of President Chávez. These claims became increasingly unsustainable after electoral observation missions from the European Union, the OAS and the Carter Center repeatedly expressed satisfaction with the transparency, fairness, and inclusive nature of Venezuela's electoral system.<sup>2</sup>

Another reason that voter turnout is expected to be high in the coming regional elections is that the country's electoral system has undergone significant improvements since the last regional race was held in 2004. It is worthwhile to examine some of these improvements more closely, as they have helped increase voter participation and provide a political landscape that is much more representative of society as a whole.

## **ENSURING GENDER BALANCE IN ELECTIONS**

As in most countries around the world, women have historically been underrepresented in Venezuelan politics. In 1998, the Venezuelan legislature passed a Law of Political Participation requiring all political parties to have an equal amount of women and men on party candidate lists. The measure was blocked however by a Venezuelan court the next year. Nevertheless, as progressive forces began to play an increasingly important political role after the approval of the 1999 Constitution, more and more women began to be elected to office. Thus, while in 2000 only 10.9% of the country's elected positions were in the hands of women, by 2005 the proportion of women had increased to 26.9%. However, many felt that this still was not enough. Over the following years a broad coalition of women of all political persuasions worked together to lobby in defense of the principle of gender parity in elections.

Tibisay Lucena, the first woman appointed to the presidency of Venezuela's electoral authority – the National Electoral Council, or CNE – has played an instrumental role in this struggle. She advocated for the establishment of candidate selection norms that require political parties to present single candidates and lists of candidates for all state and metropolitan council member elections, in which the principle of gender parity is applied – in other words, there must be an equal amount of male and female candidates. Additionally, when lists of various candidates are submitted by each party, they must have approximately 50% female candidates, whose names are alternated with those of the male candidates in the list. This system – called *alternabilidad* in Spanish – prevents parties from relegating female candidates to the end of lists, a practice which can greatly diminish their chances of being elected under the proportional voting system.



These principles are being applied for the first time ever in Venezuela's upcoming regional elections. Thus, the CNE has calculated that in the current elections the gender breakdown of candidates in the state, metropolitan, and district councils is 49.75% women and 50.25% men, as opposed to 18% women and 82% men in the previous regional elections in 2004.

## **ENHANCING VOTER PARTICIPATION**

Over the last few years, voter participation in Venezuelan elections has increased significantly, and in large part thanks to measures adopted by the CNE.<sup>3</sup>

On the one hand, it has carried out extensive voter registration campaigns that contributed to a 64% increase in the number of registered voters between 1998 and 2007. Parallel to this effort, the CNE has made voting much more accessible to millions of Venezuelans by adding new voting stations in poor neighborhoods and rural areas.<sup>4</sup>

According to CNE statistics, from 2003 to 2008, the number of voting stations in the country increased by 32.6% (from 8853 to 11,455 stations).

It should be noted that these advances have benefited all Venezuelans by increasing democratic participation. In particular, though, they have helped to empower the less privileged citizens in poor areas and Afro-Venezuelan and Indigenous communities that have traditionally been left on the sidelines of Venezuelan politics.

## **GUARANTEEING FAIRNESS AND TRANSPARENCY**

The CNE has also greatly modernized Venezuela's elections infrastructure by putting into place a fully computerized voting system that guarantees voter privacy and is completely auditable by all parties involved in the electoral process. Unlike many electronic voting systems, Venezuela's voting machines produce paper receipts confirming each vote cast. These receipts are stored in secure boxes and can be used as a check against the electronic election results.<sup>5</sup>

In 1998, only 58% of the Venezuela's voting system was electronic. Today, 99.5% of voting centers are fully computerized.

As an additional guarantee, and in order to bolster confidence in the voting system, the CNE has invited independent observers to monitor each step of the electoral process. Venezuela's elections in 2004, 2005 and 2006 were observed by missions from the Organization of American States (OAS), the European Union and the Carter Center.

In the 2008 elections on November 23<sup>rd</sup>, as was the case during the 2007 constitutional referendum, the highly respected non-partisan electoral observation group *Ojo Electoral* ("Electoral Eye") will have observers present throughout the country. Additionally, the CNE has invited electoral observers from the electoral authorities of various Latin American nations as well as from a number of foreign organizations from the US, Europe and Latin America. According to the Caracas newspaper *El Universal*, the CNE expects that some 130 foreign observers will be present throughout the country to witness the voting on November 23<sup>rd</sup>.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.cne.gov.ve/elecciones/regionales2008/documentos/Cuadro\\_General\\_de\\_cargos\\_2008.pdf](http://www.cne.gov.ve/elecciones/regionales2008/documentos/Cuadro_General_de_cargos_2008.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> "Final Report: Presidential Elections Venezuela 2006," European Union Election Observation Mission, 2006. [http://www.eueomvenezuela.org/pdf/MOE\\_UE\\_Venezuela\\_2006\\_final\\_eng.pdf](http://www.eueomvenezuela.org/pdf/MOE_UE_Venezuela_2006_final_eng.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Venezuelan Missions web page, <http://www.misionvenezuela.gov.ve/11Identidad/11Derechoexistir.htm> La Misión

<sup>4</sup> "Poder electoral democratiza distribución de centros de votación en todo el país," CNE Press Release, February 24, 2006. <http://www.cne.gob.ve/noticiaDetallada.php?id=3622>

<sup>5</sup> Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Hearing on Venezuela, June 24, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> "About 130 foreign observers in local elections," *El Universal*, November 12, 2008.

[http://english.eluniversal.com/2008/11/12/en\\_pol\\_esp\\_about-130-foreign-ob\\_12A2124325.shtml](http://english.eluniversal.com/2008/11/12/en_pol_esp_about-130-foreign-ob_12A2124325.shtml)